

CHAPTER

THE GENERAL SITUATION IN MAY 1915

(Sketch II)

By the middle of May 1915 the British operations in Gallipoli had reached a critical juncture. The hope of a short campaign, crowned by a splendid victory, had ended in disappointment. The invading army, everywhere held up by superior numbers, could do no more till heavily reinforced. Success at the Dardanelles would require a far greater military effort than those in authority had ever contemplated. In Whitehall the possibility of sustaining that effort, without prejudice to the Allied front in France, seemed problematical; and individual ministers were already considering the abandonment of the whole enterprise.

When the invading forces were thrown ashore on the 25th April it was expected that, with their help, and despite the long warning of their arrival so imprudently given to the Turks, the fleet would be able to force the Narrows within three days of the landing. The attack was regarded as essentially a combined operation, in which the army's task was "to assist the fleet to force the Dardanelles". Achi Baba, it was thought, could be easily overrun; and it was hoped that two days later British and Australian infantry would be rushing the Kilid Bahr plateau, and the Allied squadrons destroying the forts at the Narrows.

Thanks to the admirable naval and military arrangements and the heroic efforts of the troops, these extravagant hopes came near to realization on the first day of the landing. But in the stress of that first battle the few opportunities which might just have led to victory had slipped away unrecognized. The odds against success were far too heavy for winning chances to recur; and failure had supervened.

After three weeks of effort the British and French troops at Helles were still three miles from the top of Achi Baba. At Anzac the Australians and New Zealanders were hemmed in by superior numbers within a thousand yards of the beach.

May. Every unit had suffered heavy losses; there were no reserves left; and the supply of ammunition was nearly exhausted. Nothing accomplished by the army had been of any help to the fleet, and the guns of the fleet were powerless to help the advance of the army.

The Turks, too, had suffered heavy casualties, and were very short of gun ammunition. But they were finding it easy to reinforce their wasted battalions, and were working hard to increase the strength of their lines. They had not yet completed on either front a continuous system of trenches. But already their positions were strong enough to withstand an immediate attack, and long before reinforcements could arrive from England the invading army would almost certainly be committed to the conditions of siege warfare.

A suggestion had been made to the Admiralty on the 10th May that the Allied fleet should come to the army's help with another unaided effort to force the Straits. But, with the concurrence of the French Government, this proposal had been vetoed and Admiral de Robeck forbidden to make any further attempt to pass the Narrows till the Kilid Bahr plateau had been captured by the army.

By the middle of May, therefore, it was plain that, if the enterprise was to be persevered with, the original plan of operations would need amendment, and all previous estimates of the cost and duration of the campaign a very drastic revision. Instead of a combined naval and military attack—or in any case before such an attack could be launched—the Government would have to face the prospect of an arduous military campaign. The respective degrees of responsibility originally borne by the two fighting services at the Cardanellas would have to be reversed. The army would need to be heavily reinforced; and, instead of assisting the fleet to force the Narrows, it would be required to open the Narrows to admit the fleet.

To what extent the army would need strengthening before it could complete this task was not yet established. Sir Ian Hamilton had cabled on the 10th May that with an addition of two extra divisions he could push on from Helles and Anzac "with good prospects of success." But he had also stated that the enemy's defences were semi-permanent works, and Lord Kitchener had advised the Government that, in these circumstances, his estimate was too low.

This was the situation that faced the War Council on the 14th May. Three alternative methods of dealing with the problem were considered: to abandon the enterprise; to send out strong reinforcements and try for a rapid success; or to

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keep the existing formations up to strength, to send out one May fresh division, and to endeavour to wear down Turkish resistance by slow and steady pressure.

The first alternative had the disadvantage that, even if an evacuation were feasible, such an admission of failure would throw the Balkan States into the arms of Germany, and might lead to risings all over the Mahommedan world. More important still, on the 12th May Lord Kitchener had received a telegram from Russian General Headquarters stating that owing to the recent heavy losses in Galicia and the Carpathians the Russians were most anxious for a speedy decision to be reached in the Dardanelles, so that the capitulation of Turkey might release the Russian Army in the Caucasus. The third plan, though in effect a compromise, had many powerful supporters. The second plan, if troops could be made available, held out the promise of a timely and heartening victory. But against it there had to be weighed not only the urgent demands for more men and munitions for the Western front, but Lord Kitchener's forceful opinion that, having regard to the chance of a German invasion, not another man could at present be spared from England.

No decision was reached at the meeting. But it was resolved to explore the second alternative thoroughly, and, as a first step, Sir Ian Hamilton was asked for a revised estimate of the number of troops required to finish his task. He was to base his estimate on the assumption that adequate forces were available.

To Sir Ian Hamilton, who had hitherto imagined that the Government would find it difficult to spare him even two divisions, this message was a very welcome surprise. But the question asked was amazingly hard to answer. An important, yet unknown, factor in his calculations, would be the time required for large reinforcements to reach him. A scheme which promised success in the middle of May might well prove out of date in the middle of June. Doubtless it would be easy to estimate with a wide margin. But Sir Ian fully realized that the Western front was the main theatre of war. He understood Lord Kitchener's manifold anxieties, and, loyal to a fault, he determined not to increase them by asking for a larger force than he really needed.

Another uncertain factor was the probable action of Russia. The Mediterranean Expeditionary Force had no knowledge of events on other fronts. If, as originally intended, a Russian corps was to land at the Bosphorus, or even to threaten a landing, or if Greece or Bulgaria could be persuaded to join the Entente, the situation in Gallipoli would be materially affected, and the

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May invading army might then be able, in June or even as late as July, to reach the Narrows with the modest reinforcements asked for on the 10th May.

Yet, so unusual were the conditions in the Gallipoli theatre that an estimate of the numbers required to attain success was scarcely more difficult than the problem of where to put the troops on first arrival. The areas in British occupation were so small that there was barely room for the men already there. The only way of dealing with a large force would be to land the greater part of it on adjacent islands and ferry it over for battle. Even by this method it would be difficult to accommodate more than four extra divisions. The plan, moreover, had other objections, not the least of which was the risk of inclement weather. Even in the summer high seas were not infrequent, and a strong wind might prohibit the landing of troops on the exposed Gallipoli beaches at the moment they were most required. This risk would have to be run.

On the 17th May Sir Ian Hamilton replied to Lord Kitchener that if a Russian corps were to land at the Bosphorus, or if Greece or Bulgaria could be induced to declare war against Turkey, he would hope to complete his task with the assistance of no more than two extra divisions. If, however, the existing situation remained unchanged, he would want two divisions more than his former estimate, or four divisions in all.

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As regards his future plan of campaign, Sir Ian Hamilton was already of opinion that, after another month's delay, a better way must be found for reaching the Narrows than by continuing his main attack from the toe of the peninsula. In April, when his sole object was to assist the fleet to bombard the forts at the Narrows, a landing at Helles had appeared to offer many solid advantages. Both flanks of his numerically weak force would rest securely on the sea, and their subsequent advance could be given the maximum support of the fleet. The army would at the same time be able to help the fleet by forcing back the Turkish mobile armament which had hindered the work of the mine-sweepers. More important still, in the month of April Achi Baba had not been strongly entrenched; it was expected to offer a commanding view of the Turkish "Inner Defences"; and Sir Ian Hamilton had hoped to reach it on the first day of the landing.

The situation in June would be very different. Sir Ian Hamilton could then presumably count upon a much stronger force, and, as his sole task would be to capture the Narrows in order to admit the fleet, the only consideration would be the easiest line of attack from a military point of view. Recent

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experience had shown the limitations of ships' guns in an May. attack on entrenched infantry; and a series of frontal assaults, first on Achi Baba and then on Kilid Bahr, would be a costly undertaking.

In these circumstances, Sir Ian Hamilton was already approaching the solution of his problem which he subsequently adopted in July. He still believed that, with fresh troops and adequate ammunition, he could capture Achi Baba; and the occupation of that dominating height was so important to the safety of the Helles beaches that he was determined to make the attempt. But he believed that Kilid Bahr would be even more strongly held than Achi Baba, and the scheme which he was now considering was to break off his attacks in the south as soon as Achi Baba was captured, and try for a tactical surprise by dealing his decisive blow from Anzac.

For the moment, however, everything waited on the Government's decision with regard to reinforcements. But in this respect, though time was the vital factor, an early decision was impossible. Sir Ian Hamilton's message had arrived in England at the moment when the Liberal Ministry was being replaced by a Coalition Government. Another three weeks were to drift away before the new War Council, reconstituted under the name of the Dardanelles Committee, could meet to discuss the problem of the Dardanelles.

Sir Ian Hamilton's cable, however, was seen by Lord Kitchener on the 18th May, and does not appear to have convinced him that even a reinforcement of four divisions would ensure an early success. "From the standpoint of an early solution of our difficulties," Lord Kitchener replied next day "your views are not encouraging. The question whether we can long support two fields of operations draining on our resources requires grave consideration. I know that I can rely on you to do your utmost to bring the present unfortunate state of affairs in the Dardanelles to as early a conclusion as possible, so that any consideration of a withdrawal, with all its dangers in the East, may be prevented from entering the field of possible solutions." The message ended with the news that the 52nd Division, already promised on the 10th May, was about to sail for Gallipoli.

To the Commander-in-Chief on the spot this telegram, definitely promising him only one of the two divisions which, on the lowest estimate, would be needed, urging him to push on, and conveying at the same time the first official hint that in the event of his failing to do so the Government might decide to evacuate the peninsula, must in turn have been very

May, discouraging. Evidently the fate of the expedition was in the melting pot. For the moment, therefore, the only course open to the Commander-in-Chief was to endeavour, by means of local attacks, to keep the initiative in his own hands, and to gain some more elbow room at the southern end of the peninsula. In this spirit he telegraphed to Lord Kitchener on the 18th May: "Although I have made requests for certain "additional troops, I am sure you will realize that does not "imply that I am not doing all I possibly can with the force "at my disposal, and every day sees some improvement in our "position."

This telegram was no exaggeration. Already on the British and French fronts at Helles the spirits of the troops had been raised and their positions improved by several minor successes, and these were to continue throughout the month of May. At Anzac, too, Australian and New Zealand units had made some bold sorties, and by hard digging had increased the strength of their line. Nevertheless, in the absence of any definite promise of adequate reinforcements, the news that yet another Turkish corps had reached the peninsula, was received with grave misgivings.